

Lowden State Park

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No matter what town you travel through in Illinois, you will find at least one park.

Illinois is the leading state in independent park districts, with over 370 today. The quality of the park lands and forest preserves have earned Illinois its reputation of having the best public parks and forest preserves in the United States. Illinois park districts have won twice as many National Gold Medal Awards than any other state in the nation. Parks are an important aspect of most people's lives today. We walk our dogs, exercise, picnic, hike, play and so many other activities that we all take for granted. We are lucky to have places to escape our busy lives and relax in the peaceful nature. How did all these parks get started?

Illinois has benefited from its award winning park system since 1869. Shortly after the Civil War, large and small cities began setting aside land, which usually took the form of the public square or a market. But in time, courthouses, town halls and other public buildings took over. Since residents in the Industrial Revolution had few opportunities to seek open space because of the factories, they created parks. The parks were meant to serve as a get away from the horrible conditions in the city. The awakening social concern and the economic promise that parks offered, led to the growth of parks and park districts. Beginning in 1867, the city of Chicago persuaded the Illinois legislature to grant permission to create park improvement commissions, which is what led to the expansion of park districts. According to Malcolm Cairns, associate professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at Ball State University, "This heritage of

legislation . . . has given the state of Illinois a landscape of public open space and recreation grounds unique in America.” From 1870 to 1930, more than 60 Illinois park districts and lands were established. Today park districts and forest preserves number greater than 370, which shows that “There’s a lot more to Illinois than cornfields and Lincoln.”

One of the most picturesque sites along the Rock River is Lowden State Park, just north of Oregon in Ogle County. The park was established to allow visitors to share the beauty, which is why “It doesn’t take much effort to imagine why the Indians fought so valiantly to save this enchanting valley for their people,” according to author Evelyn Heinz. What separates Lowden from other parks in the area is its rich history. The park land was purchased in 1898 by Wallace Heckman, a significant Chicago attorney. Heckman and his wife had developed a love of the outdoors while studying art. They invited a group of artists from Chicago to use their site to paint. They formed a colony and adapted the name “Eagles Nest” from a dead cedar tree in which eagles once nested. The colony lasted for nearly 50 years as a home for well-noted artists of that time; one of the most famous is Lorado Taft. The colony slowly declined after Taft’s death and about a year after the last colony member left, Governor Lowden died. The park is named for Governor Frank Lowden. Soon after his death in 1943, the legislature appropriated \$25,000 toward the cost of a memorial for him. The citizens of Oregon and the surrounding area matched the amount, thinking the park would be ideal. Then in 1945, the 207-acre plot of land became Lowden State Park. More than 500,000 visitors go through the park every year. The Park Superintendent in 1986, Leroy Hayes, reported that, “The busiest times for the staff are Memorial Day weekend and the first weekend in

October.” Those who come in the fall come to see the gorgeous fall colors throughout the park and river bluffs.

The Eagles Nest Tree was a big attraction at Lowden until it fell in May 1972. The gnarled Red Cedar had been a popular climbing tree and discouraged the eagles from nesting there any longer. Despite the hardships the tree had gone through, it was estimated to be at least 650 years old when it finally fell. It now lies in a garden of prairie plants native to the area.

Another point of interest is the Northern Illinois University (NIU), now known as Lorado Taft Field Campus established in 1951. Sixty-six acres were transferred to NIU and are used for year round natural science courses in an outdoor education program. “The Lorado Taft Field Campus has earned a national and international reputation as an outstanding outdoor education center.” By far, the most famous attraction is the Black Hawk Statue sculpted by Lorado Taft from 1908 to 1910 with the help of John Prasuhn, his student. The concrete statue was meant to depict a heroic Indian looking over the Rock River Valley. One night he and his colleague were standing cross armed looking out over the river. He thought of the Native Americans who had probably enjoyed the same view for generations; so he began sketching. The statue was not meant to be associated with a famous Indian chief, but is today. The statue is “Very proud and majestic, it’s easy to see why people consider it to be Chief Black Hawk,” wrote Heinz. The statue is 48 feet tall and stands 125 feet above the river. It weighs about 100 tons and is believed to be the second largest concrete monolithic statue in the world.

Parks were begun to get away from the worsening conditions of the city during the Industrial Revolution. We are lucky to live in a state with the reputation of having

some of the best park systems in America. One of these parks is Lowden State Park in northern Illinois. It has a rich history and much to enjoy, especially the view over the Rock River. Parks are a place to get away from our busy lives and enjoy nature, and hopefully will continue to bring joy to people forever. [From The Bicentennial Commission of Ogle County, "Parks, Camps, Recreation." *Bicentennial History of Ogle County*; The Book Committee, "Lowden Memorial State Park," *The Story of Oregon, Illinois*; Rod Fensom and Julie Foreman, "Ogle County," *Illinois*; Evelyn Heinz, "Historical Lowden State Park," *Illinois Magazine*; Illinois Department of Natural Resources, "State Parks-Lowden State Park," <www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/RI/LOWDENSEP.HTM> (Sept. 29, 2006); Illinois Department of Natural Resources, *Lowden State Park*; Illinois Parks and Recreation, "History of Illinois Park Districts: Decade by Decade," <www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/1997/ip970923.html>. (Sept. 29, 2006); Liz. Rickert, *Oregon Sculpture Trail*; and Suzanne Winckler, "Illinois." *The Smithsonian Guide to Historic America*.]